

Countries of Particular Concern: Democratic People's Republic of Korea

(DPRK/NORTH KOREA)

Religious freedom is essentially absent in North Korea, where the government severely represses public and private religious activities and enforces a policy of actively discriminating against religious believers. The Commission has received reports that DPRK officials have arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes executed North Korean citizens who were found to have ties with overseas Christian evangelical groups operating across the border in China, as well as those who engaged in unauthorized religious activities such as public religious expression and persuasion. According to testimony delivered at the Commission's hearing on North Korea in January 2002, access to updated information about North Korea remains extremely limited. There is no evidence that there has been any improvement in the conditions for religious freedom in the past year.

In recent years, the government has formed several religious organizations that it controls for the purpose of severely restricting religious activities in the country. For example, the Korean Buddhist Federation prohibits Buddhist monks from worshiping at "official" North Korean temples. Most of the remaining temples that have escaped government destruction since the Korean War are regarded as cultural relics rather than religious sites. Similarly, the Korean Christian Federation restricts Christian activities. Following the reported wholesale destruction of over 1,500 churches during Kim Il Sung's reign (1948-1994), two Protestant churches and a Roman Catholic church, without a priest, opened in Pyongyang in 1988. However, the absence of a priest for Roman Catholics means that Mass cannot be celebrated and most sacraments cannot be performed. Several foreign residents have reported that they regularly attend services at these churches and that it is clear that whatever public religious activity exists, such as services at these churches, is staged for their benefit.

Persons found carrying Bibles in public or distributing religious literature, or engaging in unauthorized religious activities such as public religious expression and persuasion are arrested and imprisoned. There continue to be reports of torture and execution of religious believers. Although the practice of imprisoning religious believers is apparently widespread, the State Department has been unable to document the number of religious detainees or prisoners. According to a press report from 2001, an estimated 6,000 Christians are incarcerated in "Prison No. 15" located in the northern part of the country. The Commission learned from testimony at its January 2002 hearing that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs are treated worse than other inmates. For example, religious prisoners, especially Christians, are reportedly given the most dangerous tasks while in prison. In addition, they are subject to constant abuse from prison officials in an effort to force them to renounce their faith. When they refuse, these religious prisoners are reportedly

beaten and have died following torture.

Officials have stratified North Korean society into 51 specific categories on the basis of family background and perceived loyalty to the regime. Religious adherents are by definition relegated to a lower category, receiving fewer privileges and opportunities, such as education and employment. Persons in lower categories have reportedly been denied food aid.

Thousands of North Koreans have fled to China in recent years. Refugees who are either forcibly repatriated or captured after having voluntarily returned to the DPRK are accused of treason; those found to have had contacts with South Koreans or Christian missionaries are subjected to severe punishment, including the death penalty.

With regard to North Korea, the Commission has recommended that the U.S. government should:

- develop and support ways to provide information to the people of North Korea, particularly on religious freedom and other human rights issues, including by expanding or developing broadcasts that target a North Korean audience by the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia;

- use multilateral diplomacy to advance the protection of human rights in North Korea, including by raising human rights violations in North Korea in appropriate international fora, urging the Republic of Korea and Japan to press for improvements on religious freedom and other human rights in their talks with the DPRK, and urging the European Union to include religious freedom concerns as part of its human rights discussions with the North Korean government;

- urge China, Russia, and other members of the international community to grant refugee status to North Koreans;

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urge the Chinese government to allow South Korean and international non-governmental organizations greater access to northern China and greater capacity to serve the needs of North Korean refugees;

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use all available contacts to advance an agenda that includes the provision of humanitarian assistance, the protection of human rights, including the freedom of religion and belief, and the reuniting of Korean Americans with their family members in the DPRK, ensuring that the delivery of all humanitarian assistance to North Korea is adequately monitored; and

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work with the international community to urge the North Korean government to permit monitoring of human rights conditions by UN human rights mechanisms, and to lift restrictions on the freedom of movement by foreign diplomats, independent journalists, and others.

In addition, the U.S. Congress should fund an objective and comprehensive study of human rights conditions in North Korea by a non-governmental source, establish a congressional caucus to focus on human rights in North Korea, and expand its funding for (a) organizations advocating the protection of human rights in North Korea and (b) activities that raise the awareness of human rights conditions in that country.